

Victoria Browne
Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History
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Many of the conventions of received feminist historiography have already come under attack, be it the habit of counting "waves" in a way that would leave Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir unaccounted for, construing feminists as successive "generations" as though the only way to make sense of female political actors and thinkers would be through the roles of mothers and daughters, or the hypocritically "liberal" model of putting Western feminists at the core of the movement and then "generously" including "other" women. Browne's book, published in the congenial series "Breaking Feminist Waves," attempts to go beyond the negative work of questioning such patterns. In a reparative phenomenological spirit, she tends to the shattered elements of historiography and reassembles them into new constellations: *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*.

The structure of the book is more a rich delta than one linear stream. The project starts with a sketch of the kind of philosophy of history it then rules out as irrecoverable, namely speculative philosophies of "world history." Browne fully endorses the postcolonial critique of accounts of historical development as a linear sequence, which take the North-West as the yardstick and relegate other regions into different times or, as Dipesh Chakrabarty famously put it, into "the waiting rooms of history." She also highlights how feminist historians like Joan Scott or Gerda Lerner, by "gendering" the past, have pulled the rug out from under universal history. Nevertheless, as Browne diagnoses, a certain logic familiar from speculative notions of historical process resurface as soon as feminists turn to their own movement's past (10). She identifies this structure as "sequential negation" and describes it as follows: "the theoretical position to which the author aligns herself is accorded superiority through being designated as present or emergent, surpassing all the other phases that feminist theory has passed through to arrive at this moment of theoretical sophistication and promise for the future" (14).

Browne proposes a "reconceptualization of historical time" as a remedy in order to avoid repeating this pattern further (23). In her admirably nuanced argumentative style, she does not claim that such attempts have not been instigated before, but points to all the work that remains to be done: "multidirectional or multilinear models of historical time have been proposed, however, they are in need of elaboration and conceptual content" (25).

The first chapter contains Browne's proper proposal and can be seen as the source of four branching-off chapters. It introduces the key idea she wants to articulate in her take on

historical time, namely "polytemporality" or "complex coevalness." With Reinhart Koselleck and Paul Ricoeur, Browne not only historicizes the modern idea of linear, progressive time but identifies the matrix from which notions of temporality arise. Time, per Browne's central thesis, is experienced and constructed through social practices and thus differs according to their form. Since those practices are collective and are themselves historically received, the theory is not about everybody living "in their individual time" or "according to their own inner clock," but about clustering crucial modes of shared temporality. The deconstructive claim that no unitary definition of historical time can be given is thus complemented by constructive implications: lived time flows into several crucial trajectories of temporality (143).

We might want to raise a concern at this point, not least because Browne herself does so when she concedes that "Focusing on the 'internal' dynamics of feminist history . . . does indeed run a risk of feminist insularity" (5). Browne's exclusive focus on reconceptualizing historical time for feminist historiography of feminism (sic!) provokes two seemingly incompatible reactions. On the one hand, precisely because her account is very convincing, one would have liked to see her expand the argument into a general theory of historical time after the philosophy of history. Since a lot of the argumentative leverage of the book stems from feminist insights that are systematically brought to bear on a larger and more canonical philosophical corpus, its impact should be encompassing and not preach only to feminists who might, after all, already be convinced at the outset.

On the other hand, broadening the scope of her claim would aggravate a problem that lurks behind Browne's strategy to consider only feminist historical subject matter without ever defining feminism. With her insistence that there is no overarching narrative, no shared temporality, she undermines what is left to define feminism in the absence of a stable definition of (oppressed) women. If there is no shared history of the movement, how would one know whether an account is feminist in the first place? Browne, I think, is too quick to dismiss what Chakrabarty, focusing on the history of capitalism, has called "history one"—the universal, profit-accumulating logic of capital—versus "history two"—the situated and incommensurate social practices in which this is realized around the globe. When Browne claims that feminism does not need a "history one" (45), she seems to lose a criterion for admitting only those temporalities that somehow are "feminist." It is easy to recuperate heterodox stories and argue for giving them space if they can all be trusted to be emancipatory at the outset. If we want to turn Browne's framework into a general historiographical tool, we might want to recursively use it as a normative criterion: narratives that foreclose heterogeneous voices—be it by silencing, traumatizing, or overwriting them—are ruled out (much like Browne rules out speculative philosophy of history). Whether polytemporality is all we want from emancipatory historiography might be likewise contested, but I think it is the minimal criterion Browne needs to embrace in order to preserve the space she offers to feminist storytelling.

What then, might those emancipatory, pluralistic temporalities look like? The strands of polytemporality Browne proposes and unfolds in the following chapters are the time of the trace, narrative time, calendar time, and generational time. The list is admittedly incomplete, yet the consistent way in which Browne spells out those temporal varieties would allow fruitful continuation. Each chapter, in turn, forms its own nuanced synthesis in well-rehearsed debates and could therefore be read in its own right.

"The Time of the Trace" works between the alternatives of historical constructivism and

realism. According to Browne, embracing the fact that all history is mediated by conceptual interpretive schemas does not imply that historical events would be indifferently malleable in whichever narrative construct. Her argument draws from a reading of Ricoeur. Unlike Hayden White, who sees metaphors as replacements for historical referents, Ricoeur envisages them as links to actual historical events or findings. Browne gives a convincing demonstration that White, the alleged constructivist, needs to presuppose a "thing-in-itself" status of past events on "the other side" of the narration (58).

Her alternative conception rests on what she calls the "two-way-temporality" between historical report and the traces that trigger it: this is the "time of the trace." The historical material thereby retains a certain active power: "We are, it is true, never innocent of what we might find; but we *can* be surprised by it, hence the subversive power of history" (71). We will never recover the past "as it really was," but we are confronted with very real traces of it.

Having thus ruled out narrativist accounts of history, Browne focuses her next chapter on narration, not as the generating matrix of all things past, but as one of the collective practices constituting historical time. Here, the crucial debate is between suspicion against, and affirmation of, historical narratives. Browne starts from the assumption that narration is inescapable. Yet from a hermeneutical perspective, this is precisely the reason it is also bound to situated experience. Events are interpreted "all the way down" and thus bear the marks of their initial contexts, if they are to be intelligible at all. Browne develops her point of the always-already mediated experience via Husserl's famous example of melody perception, an experience that would be impossible without "retention" and "protention" of the notes that have passed and those that are expected. Browne then transposes the motive to the collective level by turning to Koselleck's concepts of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation," which illustrate how historical experience is always mediated through but also generative of particular notions of historical time. Following Joan Kelly's challenge of unified epochs in "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," Browne then argues for multiplying such sites of experience and expectation and adopts Walter Mignolo's term of "pluritopicality" for temporalities, thus arriving at her proposed "polytemporality" via yet another conceptual route.

In the face of such pluritopic temporalities, Browne suggests a particular receptive attitude, namely "contrapuntal reading," which looks for dissenting voices or asynchronous moments: "To read contrapuntally, then, is to recognize that if historical narratives are dependent upon intersubjective encounters and relations, it is inevitable that they will express a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, even when they *appear* to be unified and internally consistent. We can look for breaks and slippages" (95). She does not draw that connection herself, but this practice seems to be one of the preconditions for handling narratives in such a way that they do not foreclose the emergence of surprising "traces" of differently lived time.

In her subsequent chapter on calendar time, which could be said to mediate between the extremes of objectivism and subjectivism about temporal experience, Browne develops a "qualitative . . . , deepened account of calendar time as public time" (99). Her argument flows in parallel to the previous one: from the phenomenological insights of Martin Heidegger we derive the thesis that time is always already lived as "time-reckoning" and then reified in specific modes of "time-measuring." Calendar and clock-time in particular serve as a public coordination mechanism: they are produced, not given. Against Heidegger's thin and pejorative notion of the public, Hannah Arendt's account of the public as established through collective (inter)action provides welcome corrections and even imports plurality as well.

Dates, consequently, are never merely descriptive temporal mappings but are charged with associations. They function as thick, contested, normative concepts or, as Browne says following Sarah Ahmed, as "sticky signs" (115). Whatever timeline we thread them into should therefore be handled so as not to conceal its provisional, partial nature.

The last chapter is particularly rich and imaginative and examines the controversy between perpetuation or outright rejection of couching historical accounts in generational logics. Browne starts by raising several reservations that have been made against "generational time," especially as it is applied to chart the relation between feminist predecessors and successors. Judith Roof and Gillian Howie have argued that the generational model imposes Oedipal rivalry, linear progression, and a logic of endowment and guilt, yet Browne is optimistic regarding alternative configurations: "if generational time is a relational time, then different ways of relating will produce different kinds of temporalization" (120).

In order to demonstrate that the family ties underwriting the notion of generations need not impose Oedipal dynamics, Browne uses two complementing strategies. First, she gives a powerful recapitulation of Luce Irigaray's suggestion to replace the symbolic father as mediating "third" by the placenta, thereby showing that to construe a "genealogy of women" would at least be possible (127). Second, Browne refers to actual family constellations that defy the patriarchal, bourgeois norm presupposed by the Oedipal scene, using them as support that different modes of kinship do in fact exist. She consults the "queer kinship" tentatively outlined by Judith Butler and Hortense Spiller's analysis of the devastating effects the Atlantic slave trade had on the symbolization of black families' genealogy (135). Yet it seems questionable whether these disparities can dislodge the phantasmatic hold a certain model of family exerts.

Browne's reconstructed notion of generational time thus rests on an attempt at synthesis less convincing than the ones of the previous chapters. Using this temporality to account for feminism's history would still suggest that the creation of new generations should be understood on the model of "birth," rather than, say, liberation, inspiration, seduction, coalition, or education. Given that none of us was born a feminist, it seems arbitrary to understand "becoming one" on the model of biological reproduction implied by the talk of "generations." Moreover, once we enter the kinship register of "mothers," "daughters," and "sisters," (homo)erotic relations between feminists are thoroughly displaced. "Generations," of course, can be successive cohorts of activists, of cohabitants, of lovers, of scholars. But if we really gave priority to those connotations, we wouldn't even start to worry about Oedipus complexes. Although Browne's whole theoretical thrust is precisely to accommodate such counter-arguments, and her approach is surely open to recalibrating the notion of generation as an even less heteronormative or incest-taboo-stricken concept, there are principled reasons to be wary of understanding political issues through familial metaphors.

I want to return to a passage at the heart of the book that, besides counterbalancing my quibbles against generational time, illustrates Browne's polytemporal approach particularly well. In the chapter on narrative, Browne juxtaposes two quite different accounts of relating to the feminist past: Germaine Greer's and the Combahee River Collective's. They traverse not only narration, but also the other temporalities brought up in Browne's book (of the trace, calendar, and generation).

Greer introduces her *Female Eunuch* with a sharp contrast to the first wave: "This book is part of the second feminist wave. . . . The new emphasis is different. Then genteel middle-class ladies clamored for reform, now ungentle middle-class women are calling for

revolution" (88). Contrarily, the definite statement of the Combahee River Collective refers positively to a genealogy of black feminist predecessors: "Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters" (90). Browne contextualizes the statements and reads them as proof for the multiplicity of temporalities: "The comparison between these different texts by Greer and by the Combahee River Collective illustrates that no singular feminist experience or configuration of historical time can ever be presumed" (90).

Only in closing her book, Browne points briefly at the *politics* of time and hints at an additional "temporality of struggle." Yet such struggle seems not confinable to a further temporality, but inbuilt in the relation between any such narratives. Differences not only invite notice, they invite judgment. Such evaluative engagement might even be, as Linda Zerilli has argued in her *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, the condition for differences to matter at all (Zerilli 2005, 105f.). In fact, Browne's own discussion seems to gesture to the judgment that in the confrontation of Greer and the Combahee River womanists, the latter come out with a more empowering and attentive model. This doesn't mean that it might not need recalibration when transferred to other subject positions; given some imperialistic sympathies in the movement, white feminists might not want to claim all suffragettes unambivalently as grandmothers. Then again, if we tried to recuperate the suffragette, socialist, and anticolonial activism of Sylvia Punkhurst against Greer's dismissal, we don't simply add yet another temporality to the room to prove Greer's account *wrong* (only in that one respect, obviously). Although Browne rightly emphasizes the multiplicity of counter-fictions of unitary experience, it also seems important not to imagine that multiplicity as static and calm, with feminism consisting of lots of different temporalities neatly running their separate courses. The reason that movement means anything to us is its potential to break into our own time.

Evaluative engagement seems the presupposition not only for rejection, but likewise for adoption of narrative contenders that convey different temporalities. If feminism is a vital movement at all, then it is not because difference points only at differentiating—my experience isn't her experience—but also to association: her experience might also be(come) mine. Browne's innovative framework of polytemporal historical time has great potential to also capture that second movement of merging temporalities. Nonlinear histories, after all, can be folded back and forth and, in their complex coevalness, allow us to find (or even lose) ourselves in the same room with feminists of radically different temporal and spatial backgrounds. Making this room our own seems an exciting prospect for feminist historiography-to-come.

REFERENCE

Zerilli, Linda. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.